

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

The words I just read are among the most familiar words of Scripture for many Christians. They are words which are read, sung and proclaimed again and again at this time of year. And they should be familiar to us, for these words remind us of something essential for our salvation, as they tell us that Jesus, the Miraculous Son born of the virgin Mary, is both true God and true man. He is Immanuel—God with us—who has come to save His people.

When we think of the Christmas story, we think of the angels who sang at the birth of the Saviour and of the shepherds who came that first night to worship the new-born King. We think of the wise men who followed the star to Bethlehem, bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus. We think, of course, of Mary and her wonderful Son, Jesus, our Lord. But there is one person who often is forgotten in the Christmas story. He almost seems like an extra, someone who is used to fill in the scene, but who is not all that important. And that often forgotten figure is Joseph. Throughout history, Joseph has been known only as the husband of Mary, with mere lip-service paid to the fact that he was also the earthly guardian of Jesus. But he is very important to the whole story of Christmas, for without his faithful obedience to the word of God, Christmas, as we know it, may have been something far different. And that is why, on this last Sunday in Advent, with the celebration of Christmas just around the corner, we remember this faithful, forgotten father, and the part he plays in God's plan of salvation and through him learn how we can best welcome the Saviour of the world.

There are very few verses in Scripture which mention Joseph. His name is mentioned in both the genealogies of Jesus listed in the gospels, although both Gospel writers note, in some form, that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus. Luke says: ***Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli,*** (Luke 3:23 - ESV) Matthew refers to Joseph as ***the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.*** (Matthew 1:16 - ESV) We know that he was a carpenter by trade, and I believe it is safe to say that he would be well respected by his customers as an honest and hard-working craftsman. He is mentioned in our text and in Luke's account of the journey to Bethlehem. When Herod seeks to kill the new-born King, it is Joseph who is told by God to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt for safety. Joseph is mentioned when Jesus, as a young teenager goes with he and Mary to the temple. After that, Joseph is never mentioned again. We assume that he died while Jesus was still a relatively young adult.

Although Scripture does not tell us a great deal about Joseph, it does tell us some important things. First of all, Scripture shows that Joseph is a descendant of King David, as is Mary, his wife. But even more important than his lineage is the term our text uses in reference to him, for he is known as a just or righteous man. He was a good Jew, faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He knew God as a God of love and mercy, a God who was ready and willing to forgive the sins of those who came seeking His grace. He surely would have learned the promises of the Redeemer who was spoken of by the prophets; the One whom God would send to save His people from their sins. Joseph knew that he was a sinner before God, but he also trusted in God's promises and was anxiously waiting for the deliverer to come. He lived by faith in God and rejoiced in all that God had done and was doing for His people. It is because of his faithfulness that God chose Joseph to play an important part in His plan of salvation.

We can well imagine Joseph as a content, happy man. While he was far from being rich, he had a good trade, and made an honest living. And he had another reason to be happy, for he was betrothed to a wonderful girl named Mary. In those days, engagement or betrothal was much more than our engagement today. Legally, Joseph and Mary were husband and wife, yet they had not consummated their marriage or moved in together. We don't know when Joseph had planned to take Mary into

his home, but we can be sure that he was looking forward to that day. Suddenly, his dreams were shattered when something happened that he never expected. Our text tells us: *before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.* What a blow this must have been to Joseph. He did not yet know that this was the work of God. Here he was, waiting for the day when Mary would leave her father's house and move in as his wife, but now he thought that Mary had been unfaithful, for she was pregnant, and he knew that the child was not his. What was he to do? He loved Mary, but this sin totally destroyed their relationship. How could he marry her after this? Would he not be condoning her sinful action? Would it not always be a problem for their marriage, that she had been unfaithful to him? He just couldn't go through with the marriage. That left him with two choices. He could bring public charges against Mary, accusing her of adultery and letting her face the consequences, which could mean death by stoning. At the very least she would be an outcast; a shameful, despised woman. This did not appeal to Joseph who felt great compassion for Mary. There was one other option that Joseph had: he could take advantage of the lax divorce laws of the day, and divorce her quietly, freeing her to marry her lover. Because of his love for her, and because he was a good man, this is what he decides to do. Then, having finally come to a decision, he lay down to sleep. But now God gets involved. While Joseph slept, God sent an angel to him in a dream, and the angel tells him: *Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*"

Even the message of the angel didn't make this the easiest thing in the world for Joseph to do. What God was asking of him was difficult. His faith in God was being put to the test, for God was asking him to believe the impossible. And there were some social ramifications involved. Even a quick marriage would have raised a few eyebrows, and Joseph's reputation might well be questioned. People would probably gossip about his family. And then there was the responsibility of being the earthly father of the Son of God Himself. It wasn't as easy as it may seem. Joseph may still have had his doubts about the whole thing. Who could have blamed him if, when he woke up the next morning, he decided that God wasn't being fair in asking him to take Mary as his wife, especially under the circumstances? But in spite of all this, Joseph was faithful to God and obedient to His word. God didn't have to ask him twice. We are told: *When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

We can learn a great deal from this faithful, forgotten father. There is not one person gathered here today who has been asked to accept the things that Joseph had to accept. And yet God does call His people to be faithful, as Joseph was. God asks us to listen to His word and be obedient to it. And yet all too often we decide that God doesn't know what He is talking about, or we decide that he isn't being fair, and so we choose to do our own thing. We will listen to what God says, and we will do what He asks—as long as it seems reasonable to us and as long as it fits in with our plans.

If we are to be faithful as Joseph was, we need surrender our will to God's will, and give up on ourselves as we truly let Him be the Lord of our lives. God tells us: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* (Isaiah 55:8-9 - ESV) Our thoughts are sinful. God's thoughts are righteous. Our plans are selfish and imperfect. God's ways are wise and complete. God's plans also work the highest good! God also assures us: *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."* (Jeremiah 29:11, ESV) That plan, which God had promised since the very fall into sin, was now coming to its fruition in the birth of Jesus Christ. As the angel told Joseph, the Child of Mary would have the name Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins.* The angel doesn't tell Joseph that Jesus will have to die on a cross, suffering terribly as He bears the sins of all in that great battle against sin, death and hell. He doesn't tell him about the resurrection. He simply tells Joseph what God will do—and what Jesus will do. Jesus will save us from sin. Joseph must simply believe the message given to him, and do what God asks.

The faithful, trusting heart takes God at His word. The faithful heart finds its strength and motivation in the forgiveness that God bestows upon us through His Son. The faithful heart surrenders to God, for *we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* (Romans 8:28 - ESV) Who knows how the Christmas story would have turned out if Joseph had not been faithful to God? By asking Joseph to take Mary as his wife, God provided for the physical needs of Mary and the baby Jesus. The marriage would bring a legitimacy to the birth, for Joseph would be the legal, if not biological father. In Joseph, Mary had someone to help her through the difficult days ahead. Through something as simple as a marriage, God worked a great part of his plan of salvation. All it took was the faithfulness of one man, a man who is often forgotten or easily overlooked in the account of Jesus' birth. That is how God still chooses to work—through people who are faithful to Him, who hear His word, believe it and do what it asks of them. And who knows what great things God can accomplish with us and through us, when we gladly do the things He asks of us?

As we spend these last few days preparing our hearts and minds to greet the King of Kings who comes to earth at Christmas,

God grant us the faith we see in the faithful, often forgotten father in our text. May we, with Joseph, hear the word of God, believe it in our hearts, and practice it in our lives, to His honour and glory. Amen.